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The 16th Sabah State Election: Kadazandusun Politics and the *Huguan Siou* Factor

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Abstract

This article analyses the 16th Sabah State Election, focusing on the Kadazandusun-majority seats. It is based on an ethnographic study comprising interviews with candidates and casual conversations with local people in "competitive" Kadazandusun seats such as Matunggong, Kiulu, Moyog, Tambunan, Keningau, Sook, Nabawan, Tenom and Melalap. The results of the election showed that the Kadazandusun voted for status quo. In addition, following the trend of GE14, the Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS) managed to maintain its strong presence in the Kadazandusun areas. This article argues that ethnic and personality politics play an instrumental role in determining the Kadazandusun support to GRS particularly STAR (*Parti Solidariti Tanah Airku Rakyat Sabah*/Homeland Solidarity Party) and PBS (*Parti Bersatu Sabah*/Sabah United Party). While economic factors are decisive as well, the role of the Kadazandusun traditional leadership institution is pertinent in influencing the people's decision to vote.

Keywords: 16th Sabah State Election, Huguan Siou, Kadazandusun

Introduction

After ruling the country for more than 60 years, Barisan Nasional (BN) was defeated by Pakatan Harapan (PH) in the "unprecedented" 2018 General Election (GE14). Political pundits have used various terms to describe the electoral outcomes such as 'political earthquake', "Tsunami Rakyat", 'regime change' and so on (Hazis, 2018; Hutchinson & Aun, 2020; Loh, 2018). The surge of change that occurred nationwide demonstrated the disenchantment of the people towards BN and their expectation that PH would reform the nation. PH promised to promote good governance and policies based on political needs beyond ethnicity and patronage under the "new Malaysia " and "new politics" slogans. Unfortunately, after less than two years in power, the PH-led government collapsed on 24 February 2020. The collapse of PH led to power struggles among the political elites and resulted in the formation of a political coalition – Perikatan Nasional (PN) – led by Muhyiddin Yassin. Nonetheless, the PN-led government too fell from power on 16 August 2021 after a series of defections involving several UMNO Members of Parliament (MP).

Despite a smooth transition of power at the federal level after GE14, it was a different scenario in Sabah as BN and the Warisan-PH alliance were tied at 29 seats each, causing a stalemate in the 60-seat State Legislative Assembly (SLA). STAR (Homeland Solidarity Party) that won 2 seats emerged as a kingmaker. The contest to form the new state government reached its peak on the afternoon of 10 May 2018, when Musa Aman, the incumbent chief minister, claimed that BN secured a simple majority after

STAR assemblymen pledged their support to him. After seeking an audience with the Yang di-Pertua Negeri, Musa was finally sworn in as the chief minister (Bagang & Puyok, 2019; Puyok & Sukhani, 2020).

The political crisis in Sabah, however, continued when Madius Tangau, the president of United Pasokmomogun Kadazan Organisation (UPKO), made an unexpected announcement that his party would leave BN and pledge to support Warisan-PH to form the government. At an earlier press conference, five UPKO assemblymen had given their support to Musa. The following day, two UPKO and four UMNO assemblymen withdrew from BN to support Warisan-PH. The withdrawal of support by at least six assemblymen caused Musa to lose the majority and forced him to step down. The political situation in Sabah was akin to what happened in 1985 and 1994 during the PBS era.

After ruling Sabah for almost two years, the state government led by Warisan-PH fell from power following defections of its leaders to support the opposition. It has to be emphasised here that by now, the federal government was no longer controlled by PH, weakening the influence of Warisan-PH in Sabah. The 16th Sabah State Election (SSE16) took place on 26 September 2020. Out of 73 contested seats, Warisan Plus (refers to Warisan and its allies consisting of DAP [Democratic Action Party], AMANAH [Parti Amanah Negara/National Trust Party], UPKO and PKR [Parti Keadilan Rakyat/People's Justice Party]) won 32 seats, GRS (Gabungan Rakyat Sabah) 38 and independents 3. PCS (Parti Cinta Sabah), LDP (Liberal Democratic Party) and other local political parties were unable to win any seats. The real fight was between Warisan Plus and GRS even though PCS was confident of winning in areas where other opposition parties were either fragmented or weak. The other small parties were spoilers and most of their candidates lost their deposits. In the Kadazandusun areas, most of the seats were won by STAR and PBS. Overall, the voting trend in GE14 shows GRS's strong presence in the Kadazandusun areas as opposed to Warisan Plus that managed to win only five seats and UPKO just one.

This article analyses the SSE16 focusing, on the Kadazandusun seats. The article argues that ethnic and personality politics play instrumental roles in determining the Kadazandusun political support to GRS particularly STAR and PBS. While economic factors are decisive as well, the role of the Kadazandusun traditional leadership institution is pertinent in influencing the people's decision to vote.

The article is divided into five sections. The first section describes briefly the concepts of ethnic politics, leadership and traditional leadership. The second section deals with the methodology. The third section focuses on Kadazandusun Politics post GE14 and the background of the SSE16. This section also analyses the results of the SSE16 particularly in the predominantly Kadazandusun areas. The fourth section examines the Huguan Siou factor in Kadazandusun politics. The fifth section concludes the article.

Ethnic Politics and Traditional Leadership

Sabah is ethnically diverse comprising more than 40 ethnic and subethnic groups with the Kadazandusun forming the largest ethnic group (Bagang & Puyok, 2019; Department of Statistics, 2010). It is, therefore, not surprising that ethnicity plays an important role in Sabah politics. The political model chosen by the Sabah parties was very close to the communal arrangement of the government at the federal level (Milne & Ratnam, 1974; J. Ongkili, 1989; Ratnam, 2019). Sabah's demography is pluralistic in nature. In a plural society, politics is usually practised almost entirely along the ethnic lines in which different groups see one another as power competitors (Horowitz, 1993, 2014). Ethnic politics is typically seen as an issue when various groups begin to perceive one another as rivals for power and also when members think they would be excluded from the advantages of governmental support (Fearon, 2008; Horowitz, 2014). Political activities focused on ethnic identity are the causes for rivalry and conflicts across the globe (Leach et al., 2008).

Leadership is essential for a democratic society. Scholars differ on the definitions of leadership. Generally, however, they agree that leadership is a person's ability to mobilise different political,

economic, and other resources to achieve certain objectives (Rashid Moten & Syed, 2015). On the contrary, indigenous leadership is often associated with leadership within the tribe and culture (Gladstone & Pepion, 2017). In the case of the Kadazandusun, indigenous leadership here refers to the *Huguan Siou* title that is bestowed upon a "supernaturally powerful warrior" in the Kadazandusun community (Bagang & Puyok, 2021; Luping, 2013; Puyok & Bagang, 2011). The *Huguan Siou* title found its way in modern times following the rise of the Kadazan nationalists in the 1960s who would confer it on anyone they regarded as their "paramount leader" (Reid, 1997). Whoever holds the title *Huguan Siou* is regarded as a brave warrior for the Kadazandusun (Luping, 1985). As the Kadazandusun do not practise kingship system, the *Huguan Siou* plays a significant role in the social and political affairs of the Kadazandusun such as an arbitrator, chief diplomat of the community and a symbol of unity (Luping, 1985; Puyok & Bagang, 2011; Tangit, 2017).

The first *Huguan Siou* Donald Stephens and Peter Mojuntin were the major forces behind the Kadazan political movement in the early to mid-1970s. During the state election in 1976, the Kadazans decided to support BERJAYA in an effort to reverse Mustapha's culturally repressive policies. As *Huguan Siou*, Stephens reawakened the local chiefs' sense of allegiance to their paramount chief. Faithfulness to the *Huguan Siou* was transmitted through tribal leaders to the people. They trusted in the knowledge of their local leaders (Ongkili, 2003).

The founding member and president of PBS, Joseph Pairin Kitingan, carried the responsibility as the second *Huguan Siou*. Those who witnessed Pairin's bravery in defending the rights and interests of the Kadazandusun admired him for his past struggles. He revolted against Harris Salleh's leadership, left BERJAYA, and was elected as state assemblyman for Tambunan in 1984. When Pairin was the chief minister, he reversed the changes made by the BERJAYA-led government, which included the cancellation of the 'pribumi' category for the native people and *Pesta Rakyat* meant to replace *Pesta Kaamatan* (Harvest Festival) (Barlocco, 2013; Osman, 2017). Pairin was also very vocal about the illegal immigrant issue. Pairin claimed that the BERJAYA-led government did little to solve the influx of Philippine immigrants into Sabah (Mohammad Agus Yusoff, 2006). PBS alleged that many Muslim immigrants were granted citizenship despite having resided in Sabah for a short time (Mohammad Agus Yusoff, 2006). PBS leaders believed that the granting of citizenship to foreigners was done to alter Sabah's demography. It was against this scenario that the Kadazan nationalism was once again revived by the Kadazan intelligentsia led by Pairin (Yamamoto, 2002). As Kadazandusun politics is largely personalistic particularly in the rural areas, the Kadazandusun will render their loyalty to leaders that they are familiar with (Bagang & Puyok, 2021; Puyok, 2014). Close ties with their leaders and the status their leaders in the community have developed strong patron-client relationships.

Methodology

This research is primarily qualitative. An ethnographic approach comprised of interviews with election candidates and casual conversations with local people was used in "competitive" Kadazandusun constituencies such as Matunggong, Kiulu, Moyog, Tambunan, Keningau, Sook, Nabawan, Tenom and Melalap. Elite interviews were also held with several Kadazandusun leaders. In this research, Kadazandusun seats are categorised as such if the composition of the Kadazandusun voters is more than 50 percent irrespective of their religious affiliation (Bagang & Puyok, 2021). The authors also conducted fieldwork in several Kadazandusun seats during campaigning to observe political talks and study campaign posters displayed along the streets, building, and villages.

Kadazandusun Politics Post GE14 and Battleground for SSE16

The post GE14 had somewhat changed the Kadazandusun's political configuration in Sabah. The Kadazandusun were disproportionately represented, reflecting how politically divided they were. In the GE14, BN, PBS, UPKO and PBRs (Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah or Sabah People's United Party) represented the Kadazandusun. Pairin was the president of PBS before handing over presidency to Maximus Ongkili. The heads of UPKO and PBRs were Madius Tangau and Joseph Kurup. UPKO, however, quit BN in 2018 and worked with Warisan and PH to form the state government.

Outside BN, the Kadazandusun were represented by Darell Leiking and Peter Anthony in Warisan. Jeffrey Kitingan led the Kadazandusun in STAR where he was also the founding president. Other minor parties with a strong Kadazandusun presence were PCS (Parti Cinta Sabah or Love Sabah Party) and AN (Anak Negeri or Native Party). The PCS was headed by Wilfred Bumburing while AN by Henrynus Amin.

PCS, AN, and another local-based party Gagasan (Parti Gagasan Rakyat Sabah or Sabah People's Vision Party) had initially agreed to merge to become a single party with former Minister of Foreign Affairs Anifah Aman as the president. However, the proposed merger did not materialise as AN and Gagasan chose to go on their separate ways. Anifah eventually headed PCS.

In SSE16, PBS decided to contest using its own symbol as it was no longer part of BN. UPKO and PKR remained the allies of Warisan Plus but decided to contest using their own tickets. PBRS contested using BN's logo while STAR and BERSATU chose to contest under PN. BN, PN and PBS were collectively known as the Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS or Sabah People's Coalition).

The Kadazandusun had more options to choose who they were going to vote in SSE16. UPKO was expected to wrestle the Kadazandusun seats held traditionally by PBS and STAR even though some Kadazandusun seats were contested by Warisan such as Moyog, Limbahau and Malalap. The pressure was on UPKO as the party had to prove that it was more popular than PBS and STAR in the Kadazandusun areas. PBS, which was no longer a BN component member, decided to contest in areas where it still had many loyal supporters. PBRS decided to contest under a BN logo focusing on seats in the interior. STAR competed mainly in the interior as well while AN fielded its candidates in several "strategic" Kadazandusun seats.

Table 1: Party Won and Winning Candidate in Kadazandusun Seats in SSE16

Constituency	Party Won	Winning Candidate
Bangkoka	BN (UMNO)	Harun Bin Durabi
Pitas	Independent	Ruddy Bin Awah
Matunggong	PBS	Julita Mojungki
Bandau	PN (BERSATU)	Wetrom@Mohd Fikri Bahanda
Tandek	PBS	Hendrus Anding
Kadamaian	UPKO	Ewon Benedick
Tamparuli	PBS	Jahid Jahim
Kiulu	PBS	Joniston Bangkuai
Inanam	PKR	Peto Galim
Moyog	Warisan	Ignatius Dorell Leiking
Limbahau	Warisan	Juil Bin Nuatim
Kundasang	PBS	Joachim Gunsalam
Karanaan	PN (BERSATU)	Masidi Manjun
Paginatan	PN (STAR)	Abidin Bin Madingkir
Tambunan	PN(STAR)	Jeffrey G. Kitingan
Bingkor	PN (STAR)	Robert Tawik @ Nordin
Liawan	PN (STAR)	Anwar Ayuub @ Annuar Ayub
Malalap	Warisan	Peter Anthony
Kemabong	Independent	Rubin Bin Balang
Tulid	PN(STAR)	Flovia Ng
Sook	PN (STAR)	Ellron Angin
Nabawan	PN (BERSATU)	Abdul Ghani Yassin
Telupid	PBS	Jonnybone J Kurum
Kuamut	Independent	Masiung Banah

Source: Authors' calculation from <https://dashboard.spr.gov.my/#!/home>

Based on Table 1, PBS and STAR won most of the seats contested in the predominantly Kadazandusun seats. PBS obtained six seats while STAR won five seats. BN and BERSATU captured one and three seats respectively. Warisan and its allies only succeeded in winning five seats with UPKO winning just one. In terms of popular votes, GRS obtained almost half while Warisan and its allies only attained 32.61% (Table 2). There is also a significant drop in the popular votes obtained by Warisan from 32.55% in GE14 to 14.55% in SSE16, signaling the swing of the Kadazandusun support to GRS. Most of the key Kadazandusun leaders from GRS also managed to increase their majority gains as compared to GE14 (Table 3). Nevertheless, the popularity of emerging Kadazandusun leaders such as Darell and Anthony cannot be discounted judging from the increase in their popular support (Table 3).

Table 2: Popular Votes According to Parties in the Kadazandusun Seats in SSE16

Party	Popular Votes (%)
Warisan	14.55 (32.55)
PKR	7.02
UPKO	11.03
Total	32.61
Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS)	
BN	11.98
PN	20.28
PBS	18.13
Total	50.40 (45.70)
Others	16.97

Note: Number in parentheses show the popular votes obtained in 2018

Source: Bagang & Puyok (2021, p. 298)

Table 3: Electoral Performance of Key Kadazandusun Leader, GE14 and SSE16

Leader	Party	Position	Majority Obtained	
			GE14	SSE16
Jeffrey Kitingan	STAR	President	1037	6792
Robert Tawik Nordin	STAR	Vice President	165	5070
Ellron Angin	STAR	Deputy President	4485	1232
Jahid Jahim	PBS	Deputy President	2080	3517
Joachim Gunsalam	PBS	Vice President	255	1422
Joniston Bangkuai	PBS	Secretary General	1443	1221
Ewon Benedick	UPKO	Vice President	3294	3459
Ignatius Dorell Leiking	Warisan	Deputy President	4442	5935
Peter Anthony	Warisan	Vice President	293	1719
Masidi Manjun	BERSATU	State Deputy Chairman	3782	4814

Source: compiled from <https://dashboard.spr.gov.my/#!/home>

Overall, following the trend of GE14, GRS managed to maintain its strong presence in the Kadazandusun areas in SSE16. The results suggest that voting patterns in the Kadazandusuns areas remains unchanged despite the effort of Warisan and its allies to woo the Kadazandusun voters. The biggest casualty is UPKO that only managed to win one seat, indicating that the Kadazandusun particularly in the rural areas still preferred to support parties and leaders that they were familiar with – in this case, PBS and STAR. UPKO's decision to rebrand to become more multiracial also failed to widen the party's appeal in non-Kadazandusun areas. Perhaps, the most significant factor that contributed to the support of the Kadazandusun to PBS and STAR was the traditional leadership status held by Pairin and Jeffrey, which will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

The *Huguan Siou* Factor

One of the competitive seats in the Kadazandusun areas was Kiulu which was contested by two prominent Kadazandusun political figures, UPKO's president, Madius Tangau and Joniston Bingkuai, PBS's secretary-general. During campaigning, Pairin came to Kiulu and campaigned for Joniston. He reminded the people about PBS's struggle to fight against an authoritarian government in the past that had stifled religious freedom and failed to resolve the issue of illegal immigrants (Unto, 2020). Pairin said that it was imperative to vote for PBS to save Sabah from the influx of illegal immigrants which Warisan had failed to solve. It was not the first time that Pairin had urged that the Kadazandusun to unite behind PBS. In the Kimanis by-election on 18 January 2020, Pairin made the same call and was especially critical of the *Pass Sementara Sabah* (Sabah Temporary Pass or PSS) which he argued would disadvantage genuine Sabahans particularly the Kadazandusun (Thestar, 2020). Pairin's campaign messages resonated well among most voters in Kiulu. Madius, who was tipped to win, failed to capture Kiulu from PBS. Madius later admitted that his defeat was due to the appearance of strong political figures such as Pairin and Musa Aman (Tangau (2021, April 27). Personal communication). Joniston retained the seat with a majority of 1221 votes. Pairin's presence had no doubt helped to convince the Kadazandusun to support PBS especially among the older voters. In illustrating this, Sebastian Anjim admitted that,

Pairin is very a charismatic leader from the beginning. Even in Kuala Penyu, I remember, when I was the head of a division, when we tell the kampung folks that Pairin is coming to Kuala Penyu, the older Kadazandusun (Tatana) were so excited and happy to meet him (Anjim (2020, July 13). Personal communication).

As *Huguan Siou*, the political support to Pairin came almost naturally. Other emerging Kadazandusun leaders realised the significance of the *Huguan Siou* title and tried to position themselves to be the next paramount chief of their community. The talk of the town was that Warisan's vice president Peter Anthony was positioning himself to be the next *Huguan Siou* even though he denied it and maintained that Pairin was still the indisputable cultural leader of the Kadazandusun (Joibi, 2018). Peter is also the president of Kadazandusun Malaysia (KDM Malaysia), a Kadazandusun-based NGO, which some have regarded as a rival to the Kadazandusun Cultural Organisation (KDCA).

The aura of being a *Huguan Siou* is also felt by Pairin's brother, Jeffrey. In 2016, he was given the title *Huguan Siou Lundu Mirongod* by the Dusun Tindal of Kota Belud (Farnandez, 2016). *Huguan Siou Lundu Mirongod* refers to a paramount thinker of the Kadazandusun. The title was bestowed upon the STAR president for his specific achievements and contributions in leading the Kadazandusun community to develop intellectually in many fields. Jeffrey's "consistent" MA63 struggles since 1980s have made him slightly more popular than Pairin especially among the many educated Kadazandusun. Commenting on being conferred with the title *Huguan Siou Lundu Mirongod*, Jeffrey said,

It's an honour to be conferred as Huguan Siou Lundu Mirongod by the Keepers of the Adat. I think this is (due to) my contribution to the people (that is being recognised) by the elders. It's not the same as the Huguan Siou (which is) a specific title (Kitingan (2021, February 22). Personal communication)

In GE14, Jeffrey retained his parliamentary seat of Keningau by defeating Pairin in Tambunan (Bagang & Puyok, 2019). In SSE16, Jeffrey solidified his position after retaining the Tambunan seat with a vast majority of 6792 votes. Jeffrey is among the very few political elites from the 1980s era who still enjoys commendable support among his loyal supporters.

The traditional titles held by Pairin and Jeffrey have given them some 'political advantages'. Being the only *Huguan Siou* after Stephens, the older Kadazandusun continue to look up to Pairin with a sense of respect and admiration. Not all, however, perceive Pairin's role as *Huguan Siou* positively as some accuse him of using his cultural position for political mileage. Reacting to Pairin's dual role as *Huguan Siou* and former president of PBS, Jeffrey said,

Well, the Huguan Siou is apolitical. (He is) the paramount leader of the people. It's only when you're the Huguan Siou and (the) president of (a) political party then it becomes politicised and that's how it happens when Pairin is the Huguan Siou and the same time (he was) the president of PBS. That's why we wanted the Huguan Siou institution to be separated (from politics). You cannot be the Huguan Siou and the president of a political party (Kitingan (2021, February 22). Personal communication).

For some, Pairin is the “reluctant” *Huguan Siou*. After Stephens’s death, two names popped up as the potential *Huguan Siou* -- Ghani Gilong and James Ongkili – but both declined the position. A visionary *tantagas/bobolian* (high priestess) chief named Pairin as the *Huguan Siou* on 18 December, 1983, in Kg Bangkahak, Kota Belud (Anthony, 2018). In March 1984, the 3rd KCA Delegates Conference unanimously endorsed Pairin as the *Huguan Siou* (Anthony, 2018; Reid, 1997). In responding to critics who questioned his role as *Huguan Siou* and PBS advisor, Pairin said,

Critics will always say what they want to say. But a lot depends on leadership and honest intentions. If people have faith in the leader, the leader will and should get the necessary support. I play my part according to my role and responsibility. There is no conflict at all (Kitingan (2021, August 30). Personal communication).

Meanwhile, Jeffrey's struggles for state rights and autonomy have earned him the respect of the Kadazandusun especially the young and educated ones. For his significant contributions to their community, he is elevated as their *Huguan Siou Lundu Mirongod* or 'thinker leader'. On whether the traditional title that he holds is of less significant compared to the one held by Pairin is open to debate. But if Jeffrey’s and STAR’s recent electoral achievements are anything to go by, they indicate that the Kadazandusun are prepared to look beyond Pairin as their sole cultural leader. The *Huguan Siou* may still be revered by the older Kadazandusun but the young ones perceive their traditional leader differently. Some question the relevancy of the traditional status in the modern times and want their *Huguan Siou* to focus more on issues such as employment, education and business opportunities (Bagang & Puyok, 2021).

Conclusion

The SSE16 shows the persistence of ethnic and personality politics as reflected in the support of the Kadazandusun to Pairin and Jeffrey. The lack of such personalities in Warisan and UPKO have made the two parties less attractive particularly among the people in the rural areas. The *Huguan Siou* leadership institution has become embedded in the cultural identity of the Kadazandusun and therefore will remain a force to be reckoned with in the future trajectories of Kadazandusun politics. What makes ethnic politics enduring in Sabah is the ability of political leaders such as Pairin and Jeffrey to personate themselves both as the traditional and political leaders of their communities.

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